

Remarks at the WTO Ministerial NGO Forum

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Good morning. As Chair of this Third WTO Ministerial Conference, and on behalf of the United States Government, I welcome each of you to Seattle and I thank you all for coming.

I also thank Director-General Moore for his leadership and vision in sponsoring this Civil Society Day; and each of the distinguished representatives of the non-governmental world from academia, business, agriculture, environmental, labor and other organizations who will appear before us today.

We have come here to participate in an historic event. In the days ahead, we will, in effect, close the book on the past fifty years of international trade policy, and open the door to a new century. And as we think about the tasks we will face in the days and years to come, it would be fitting for us to look back upon the accomplishment of our predecessors.

The trading system Director-General Moore heads today dates back to the postwar era: to the decision of 23 nations to join in the creation of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs in 1948.

Their world was very different from ours today. It was impoverished and fragmented: by the Second World War; by the Communist experiment; and by the trade barriers set up between the World War I and World War II, which did so much to deepen and prolong the Depression. And in the light of their experience the GATT founders responded with a far-sighted and generous vision, expressed so well by our wartime leader, President Franklin Roosevelt:

“A basic essential to peace, permanent peace, is a decent standard of living for all individual men and women and children in all nations. Freedom from fear is eternally linked with freedom from want. [And] it has been shown time and time again that if the standard of living in any country goes up, so does its purchasing power -- and that such a rise encourages a better standard of living in neighboring countries with whom it trades.”

Since then, through eight negotiating Rounds capped by the creation of the WTO in 1995, in America, under a bipartisan commitment stretching from Roosevelt through Kennedy to President Clinton today; we have worked together – each of us with our own goals in mind; but, at our best, also mindful of the broader mission of open markets, mutual benefit, and shared destiny.

- We have reduced tariffs by 90%, and broadened our agenda to include agriculture, services, technical standards, subsidies, intellectual property, dispute settlement and many other issues.
- And we have expanded membership, from the original 23 GATT members to today's 135 WTO members, extending the trading system's principles of open markets, transparency and rule of law throughout the world.

These have never been easy decisions. To accept an open economy is to set high standards for ourselves; to accept competition, and the change and adjustment that come with it. Each of us must accompany an open trade policy with a commitment to education, job training, and adjustment. But each of us also can observe that to accept an open economy is to open new possibilities for our working people and industries; reduce the cost of the essentials of life for the poor; and accept our responsibilities to one another. And this is clear in the remarkable developments since the GATT founders met fifty years ago.

- Since 1950, global trade has grown fifteen-fold; and per capita income almost tripled.
- Daily life has improved for billions of people: since 1950, world life expectancy has grown by twenty years; infant mortality dropped by two-thirds; the threats of hunger and famine receded; and the trading system deserves substantial credit for this.
- And the divisions between nations have eased, as first Germany and Japan were reintegrated into the trading system following World War II; then much of the post-colonial world; and now the transitional economies breaking with communist central planning practices. And as they integrated themselves into the world economy, these groups of nations also have seen their stake in a world governed by mutual benefit and the rule of law grow; and thus the chance for a lasting peace has strengthened.

If we pause, before opening this Ministerial Conference, to take stock of the record, we can see that it is very good. The great task of postwar reconstruction is far behind us. And in some of the other early challenges – reducing the trade barriers of the Depression years; responding to decolonization – while much remains to be done, we have also made great progress. But as time has passed, a new set of responsibilities has arisen:

- The response to the end of the Cold War, as countries once run by communist planning systems seek to rejoin the world economy.
- The full integration of the least developing countries – those nations most afflicted by poverty, hunger, and want – into the modern world economy.
- The challenges and opportunities presented by the technological revolution, in areas such as electronic commerce, telecommunications, and biotechnology.

- The protection of the environment we hold in trust for future generations from pollution and rising pressure on land, water and natural resources.
- The guarantees of respect for the internationally recognized core labor standards: freedom from forced labor and abusive child labor, the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, the end of discrimination.
- And the reality, which all institutions including the trading system face, that as education improves and new communications technologies appear, that practices at odds with principles of openness and transparency are not only outdated, but cause for suspicion and loss of faith.

These are the challenges before the Ministerial Conference today. They are profound and difficult; many of the most unassailable propositions on labor, environment and transparency are not accepted by many countries. But when we consider the challenges of the postwar generation and their accomplishment, we must be similarly farsighted and absolutely determined.

The goal is to create a world economy in which more open trade offers opportunities for prosperity and growth for farmers, working people and entrepreneurs. Which helps families, in particular the poor, raise living standards by offering greater choices of goods at better prices. Which helps the developing world take its rightful place in the trading system. Which contributes to the fight against hunger, by reducing barriers to the flow of food around the world. Which takes full advantage of the potential of the scientific and technological revolution. And which recognizes that labor, environment and transparency-related issues are not poor cousins, but must bear weight in the 21st-century economy. And this Civil Society Forum is a sign that the WTO is beginning to respond to the last and perhaps most important challenge: that of democratization.

Today, we will receive and exchange ideas and advice from academics, farmers, business executives, labor leaders, scientists, consumer representatives, women's groups, environmental leaders and religious figures. It will be a day of intense substantive discussion, which will help the Ministerial as it proceeds towards the launch of the new Round. And just as important, it will open the Ministerial on a note of openness and transparency.

Thus, this event will help us ensure that in the next five decades as in the last, the trading system will continue to raise living standards for the world's people; strengthen peace among the world's nations; and meet the needs and concerns of the public it is here to serve.

Thank you very much.